MEDIA WATCH **Ben Goldacre**

Journalists: anything to declare?

Drug companies wouldn't pay for the media to attend their events if they didn't think it would affect coverage, yet journalists' competing interests usually remain undeclared

Much as I like to think that I am cynical and worldly, being a doctor and a journalist, the world still holds some surprises for me. Conflict of interest is a subject that creates heat and concern, not least among journalists, who often stumble on a banal and openly declared interest and use it to build fantasies of medical corruption and Pulitzer prizes.

Although there is good evidence for the venality of drug companies in the way they conduct their public relations—and the success of this PR in influencing published academic work—it is often tempting to point out that the entire culture of academic funding has changed over the past 20 years and that politicians, journalists, and the public themselves might take some responsibility for the fact that governments choose not to fund academic work.

But that's a digression. Given the puritanical stance of so many journalists, I was surprised last week by an email circular I received from a science writers' mailing list. It was from the Aspirin Foundation, a group funded by the drug industry, and it was offering—on behalf of Bayer Healthcare—to pay expenses for journalists to attend the European Society of Cardiology's conference in Vienna.

Now aspirin is without doubt an excellent and cheap drug. But in my naivety I had no idea such things went on. I pinged off a few emails to friends and colleagues. Most poked fun at my innocence—quite rightly—but some were helpful. Not only is it extremely common for journalists to take money from drug companies, but there have been some astonishing cases in recent history, including one memorable case where a PR company invited journalists to "an exclusive preview" of new laser eye technology, with the offer to "discuss free treatment in return for editorial features."

"I organise the media programmes for a number of medical conferences run by scientific societies," said one person who, without wishing to be melodramatic, has asked to remain anonymous, "and I reckon at least 50% of the journalists present are paid for by drug companies. They get pretty well looked after too—first class travel, five star hotels, posh dinners, etc. Some of them indulge in double dipping, where they are paid by the day by the drug company and then by the publication that takes whatever they have written. Sometimes they don't even use the press room, spend all their time in company hospitality suites, and just go to company sponsored satellite sessions and press conferences."

What was more striking was the range of responses I had: some laughed at my naivety; some expressed outrage at the venality of their colleagues; and some were emotive and defensive, playing down the idea that there was anything to worry about and explaining that journalists could detach themselves from such ties and remain impartial. In fact the arguments almost exactly mirrored those among medics, played out in editorials and letters about conflict of interest in academia, about 15 years ago.

Then, as now, it's easy to become histrionic about conflicts of interest (or "competing interests," to give them their more considered name). A conflict of interest is "a situation not a behaviour," and simply receiving funding or jollies does not mean that you will change your mind. But it's a discussion worth having: only one journalist friend had seen a declaration of competing interests appearing next to their article (it was in the *Guardian*), and few journalists I spoke to could think of any explicit policies on the subject.

"There are real dangers in being too close to PR people: lovely though they may be, their trade is, by definition, manipulation"

Furthermore, there are real dangers in being too close to PR people: lovely though they may be, their trade is, by definition, manipulation. Drug companies are businesses, with responsibilities to their shareholders, and they wouldn't pay for journalists to attend their events if they didn't think it would affect media coverage of their product. After all, a journalist's article is far more credible than a paid advertisement, for anybody's money, and more likely to be read by potential consumers.

As we know from medicine and academia the ways of conflicting interests can be subtle. Not just money, hotels, and free eye surgery, but also the "revolving door"—the free movement between "mass media journalist" and "industry copywriter" is every bit as worrying as, for example, the gay dance from the US Food and Drug Administration to drug company.

But most often it is simply about fostering a relationship. To take a passing example, in 1982 the Aspirin Foundation of America—a body similar to the one offering money from Bayer—fought a successful media campaign against a US government proposal to put warning labels on aspirin packages. As you may remember, the possible link between Reye's syndrome, which affects children and is often fatal, and aspirin had recently become prominent.

It's much easier to get someone to take your calls when they've taken your money. And I, for one, will in future read outraged media reports of academic conflicts of interest with a wry smile indeed.

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